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The paper explores the construct of Employee Engagement from a critical and discourse perspective. It is argued that the win-win discourse which characterizes much discussion on EE within a traditional management paradigm presents a decontextualized, depoliticized vision of the organization. The paper examines mainstream critiques of the construct of employee engagement and the contribution of HRD, and notes that HRD processes and practices are seen as important contributors to engagement. It introduces a critical perspective on employee engagement and HRD, viewing employee engagement as a social construction. It highlights problematic assumption in mainstream literatures, such as of the accordance of employee and organization interests. The paper examines how the discourse ‘talks employee engagement into being’, how cultural management programmes serve to construct the ‘engaged employee’, and the impact of competing discourses. A discussion on disengagement reflects on the mis-match between Fordist work practices and employee engagement. The paper concludes by arguing that viewing employee engagement through a critical lens can potentially help towards an HRD practice that is focused on employee interests rather than largely on organizational interests.

Keywords: employee engagement; discourses; critical HRD;

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## **The Extra Mile deconstructed - A critical and discourse perspective on Employee Engagement and HRD**

Extraordinary as it may appear, none of them took any pride in their work: they did not 'love' it. They had no conception of that lofty ideal of 'work for work's sake', which is so popular with the people who do nothing. On the contrary, when the workers arrived in the morning they wished it was breakfast-time. When they resumed work after breakfast they wished it was dinner-time. After dinner they wished it was one o'clock on a Saturday.

Robert Tressell (1914) *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*.

### **Introduction**

Recent years have seen a burgeoning interest in the construct of Employee Engagement. Kahn (1990) coined the term 'employee engagement' (EE), describing the experience of an engaged individual being 'psychologically present' during 'work role performances', and contrasted this with the experience of 'disengagement' (Kahn 1990, 694). EE has since been described as a combination of commitment to the organization and its values, motivation, job satisfaction, discretionary effort by employees, and a willingness to help out colleagues (CIPD 2008). HRD processes and practices are seen as important contributors to engagement, and there is an increasing focus on EE from an HRD perspective. A burgeoning popular and consultancies literature on EE has been accompanied by an increasing focus in academic publications. EE has become big business for consultancies, and is promoted by professional bodies and governments.

This paper presents a critique of EE and HRD from a critical management perspective, and examines EE as a discourse, exploring underpinning rationales and assumptions. Rigg, Stewart and Trehan (2007) argue that 'traditional' HRD has been

lacking in a critical perspective, and employs humanistic assumptions about individual identity and the self, and representationalist perspectives on the organization. Generally organizational interests dominate HRD (Callahan 2007). A critical approach to management study views HRD as a social construction, its theory and practice ‘embedded in the historical and cultural relations of power and domination’ (Alvesson and Willmott 2012, 41). O’Donnell, McGuire and Cross (2006, 5) argue that ‘HRD exists in a continual state of dialectical tension’ between serving the interests of capital or labour. It is argued here that the win-win discourse which characterizes much discussion on EE within a traditional management paradigm presents a decontextualized, depoliticized vision of the organization. The discussion in this paper is not presented in opposition to what has been called more ‘mainstream’ or ‘realist’ forms of analysis, but to offer an alternative perspective to seek to enrich knowledge (Ezzamel and Willmott 2008).

The paper draws on HRD academic literature, and also from literature on HRM and management studies, and reports from consultancy, government and academic research sources. Whilst there is specific focus on HRD and EE, there is also an assumption that HRD is seen as having a close relationship and often interlinked with HRM practices, and writing focusing on HRM or management is of relevance to HRD thinking on the topic. The first section introduces the construct of EE and the contribution of HRD, and examines some of the claims and critiques made in the HRD and wider mainstream literature. The next section introduces a critical HRD perspective on EE, examining some underpinning assumptions, highlighting in particular the problematic assumption of the accordence of employee and organization interests. EE is then examined as a discourse, how the discourse ‘talks EE into being’, the discourse of cultural management, and how organizations operate

with multiple discourses. The role of EE as a discourse to construct the ‘engaged employee’ is examined, the impacts of competing discourses, and how individuals are conscripted into and resist dominant discourses. A discussion on disengagement then reflects on differing organizational contexts and the very different experiences of workers, and the mis-match between Fordist work practices and EE. The paper concludes by discussing some implications for HRD theory and practice, arguing that viewing EE through a critical lens can potentially help towards an HRD practice that is focused on employee interests rather than predominantly on organizational interests.

### **Employee Engagement and HRD – normative claims and critiques**

In this section I will examine some of the debates around definitions and scope of EE and the claims made for it. This concerns the problems that EE is designed to ‘fix’, an understanding of the ‘engaged employee’, and arguments as to how organizations can support EE. I will highlight some of the debates and concerns that have emerged over the construct. I consider these studies and claims ‘normative’ in that most writing on the topic of EE tends to have a conventional ‘technical’ concern with finding solutions to management problems (Alvesson and Willmott 2012). Having set the scene I will go on in the next sections to present some alternative ways of conceptualising EE, and further examine some of underpinning assumptions of writing on EE.

Definitions of EE generally refer to employee attitudes and behaviours and their impact on work outcomes. Shuck and Wollard (2010, 103) examined EE from an HRD perspective and defined it as ‘an individual employee’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioural state directed towards desired organizational outcomes’. Others draw

on related concepts such as motivation, burnout, commitment, empowerment and organizational citizenship behaviour, seeing engagement as a multidimensional construct (Allen and Meyer 1990; Macleod and Clarke 2009; Robinson, Perryman and Hayday 2004). Engagement is said to include a willingness to ‘go the extra mile’ for the employer, and result in improved individual and subsequently organizational performance (CIPD 2008; Gatenby, Rees, Soane and Truss 2009; Shuck, Rocco and Albornoz 2010). Highly engaged employees ‘work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company’ (Attridge 2009, 387). It is argued that to compete effectively, companies must enable employees to apply their full capabilities to their work. How organizations can foster EE is central to much thinking, in particular the role of managers and leaders. ‘Engaging leaders’ support adaptability, experimentation, learning and innovation (Alimo-Metcalfe, Alban-Metcalfe, Bradley, Mariathasain and Samele 2008). Managers demonstrate a facilitative and empowering style through listening, providing feedback, and offering support and recognition for effort (Macleod and Clarke 2009).

Engagement is often measured by employee attitude surveys, such as the Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA) (Harter, Schmidt and Keyes 2003). The surveys cover aspects such as commitment to the organization and identification with its values; belief that the organization enables the individual to perform well; and being a good organizational citizen (Robinson et al. 2004). Survey results will usually be benchmarked against results from similar organizations, overall results from similar surveys, and previous survey results.

The antithesis of engagement is disengagement, which is said to be widespread, potentially 20% of the global workforce (Saks 2006). It is estimated that between only 20% and 30% of the global workforce is fully engaged (Attridge 2009;

Saks 2006). Disengaged workers potentially result in lost productivity; not only their own, but also by undermining more engaged co-workers (Attridge 2009). A large study by Gallup suggests that in 2008 the cost of disengagement to the economy was between £59.4 billion and £64.7 billion (Robinson, Hooker and Hayday 2007).

There has been an emerging interest in EE and HRD. In part the construct is seen as significant because support for learning, training, and development forms a key part of practices claimed to facilitate engagement. Formal training and development interventions such as coaching and mentoring, support for personal and professional development, opportunities for skills development, management development programmes and support for communities of practice are all cited as important contributors to EE (Robinson et al. 2007; Seijts and Crim 2006; Valentin 2013). The construct of EE itself is also of interest to HRD researchers, for example antecedents to EE (Wollard and Shuck 2011), employee perspectives on EE (Shuck, Rocco, and Albornoz 2011), EE and Leadership (Shuck and Herd 2012), linking theory and scholarship to practice (Shuck and Reio Jr. 2011). An HRD perspective has specific contributions to make to the study of EE. For example, Shuck and Rose (2013) focus on the issue of employee experience of meaning and purpose, and contrast ‘engagement as outcome’ with ‘engagement as condition’, arguing that engagement cannot be commanded, it is offered by employees if conditions are right. Shuck, Rocco and Albornoz (2010) highlight the important contributors to engagement of relationship development, attachment to co-workers, workplace climate and opportunities for learning.

Whilst significant claims are made for the contribution of EE to organizational success, as noted EE is a complex and contested construct. There is a lively debate in the academic literature about definitions, manifestations, drivers and barrier to EE,

and how EE has been researched and marketed (eg. Shuck 2011). Some of this has urged caution in adopting the construct, referring to competing interpretations in how EE is defined and measured, limitations of academic research, and construct validity of engagement measures, for example. Some see it as a confused construct, subject to varying and imprecise interpretations, and varying or unclear in how much it overlaps or is distinct from constructs such as organizational commitment and motivation (Macey and Schneider 2008; Saks 2006). Some writers have urged caution over the excessive focus on the benefits of EE. Brewster, Higgs, Holley, and McBain (2007) suggest that ‘over-engagement’ may have potential unintended consequences. Over-involvement in work activities may result in workers experiencing work/ family conflict, for example (Brewster et al. 2007). Over-engagement might result in excessive internal focusing in the organization, rather than flexibility and openness to change (4-Consulting 2007).

Most writing on EE has concentrated on the performance outcomes and the subsequent organizational benefits of engagement, to the neglect of a focus on the employee experience (Shuck and Rose 2013). Shuck and Rose (2013, 343) argue that the experience of work as meaningful and purpose-driven is necessary to stimulate the ‘condition of engagement’. Robertson and Cooper (2010) argue that a ‘Narrow Engagement’ focus neglects employee psychological wellbeing, and argue for an integrated concept of ‘Full Engagement’, which pays attention to the wellbeing of individuals. Fairlie (2011) comments that HRD can address engagement through promotion of ‘human development’, which concentrates on employee perceptions of meaningful work. He suggests that meaningful work should be audited on employee surveys, and HRD professionals could communicate opportunities for meaningful work and enable the development of more opportunities (Fairlie 2011).



On the face of it the focus on the need for organizations to treat employees fairly and provide development and support to ‘enable’ engagement would seem to be in accord with HRD’s domain and values. As noted there have been concerns in the HRD literature for more focus on the employee side of engagement. However, there are unexamined assumptions underpinning much of the wider literature on EE, with most studies of EE taking a prescriptive and normative ‘managerialist’ approach. Many seem to take a particularly optimistic view of managerial and organizational intentions – if enough evidence is presented on the importance of EE as a contributor to organizational success, then companies should ‘see sense’ and nurture their employees. The underpinning rationale is based on systematic modernism (Cooper and Burrell 1988). This approach assumes that problems in society (including organizational problems) can be resolved by rationality ‘because it is seen as neutral and value-free’ (Learmonth 2003, 95). ‘Better management’ is seen as universally beneficial, but in fact it may contain forms of insidious oppression (Learmonth and Harding 2004). The next sections will examine EE through a critical management lens.

### **A critical management perspective on HRD and employee engagement**

As Rigg et al. (2007) note, ‘traditional HRD’ has been dominated by a ‘performative’ focus on improving performance, usually defined in economic terms. The performance paradigm dominates HRD theory and practice (O’Donnell et al. 2006.) Critical management studies (CMS) questions such taken for granted perspectives in organizations and organizational research, stresses the political nature of organizational life, and seeks to debunk conventional ‘myths’ (Burrell 2001). A critical analytical, social scientific approach to ‘employment management activities’

(Watson 2004, 448) conceptualises organizations as sites of contested relations and knowledges (Fenwick 2005).

EE can be viewed as example of cultural management of organizations, which aims to manufacture a 'systematic coherence' in the organization (Legge 2005). This has an underpinning 'unitarist' assumption that the interests of organizational stakeholders, in particular workers and 'the organization', coincide (Keenoy 2009). Organizations are viewed as places where members work collaboratively towards collective goals (Fleming and Spicer 2007). It is assumed that 'organizational members share a commitment to values, beliefs, taken-for-granted assumptions that direct or reinforce behaviours considered conducive to organizational success' (Legge 2005, 214).

The assumption behind EE is clearly in this domain. Kontakos (2007, 76) for example provides an example of how an employee development programme designed for engagement 'aligns and monitors employees' job and career goals to the organizations' strategic goals'. Whilst individual employees' development plans are drawn up collaboratively between line manager and employee, the clear focus is on achievement of organization goals. There is an explicit assumption that the goals of the individual and the organization are in accord, or can be made so, and that worker/manager interests are aligned (Fenwick 2005). Engagement not only enhances employee well-being, motivation or career enhancement, but also, as Harter, Schmidt, and Keyes (2003:2) optimistically assert 'studies show that the well being of employees may be in the best interests of the employer', and 'individual and employer needs can be filled simultaneously'.

There is an assumption that organization goals are clearly articulated, and that managers and employees can accurately identify these, and align learning goals to

them, all assumptions which have been challenged (eg. Clegg, Kornberger and Pitsis 2011). In contrast, organizations can be viewed as ‘sites of struggle’ where different groups compete to shape the social reality (Grant, Iedema and Oswick 2009). As Watson (2004) notes, ‘organizational arrangements generally and HR strategies specifically are outcomes of human interpretations, conflicts, confusions, guesses and rationalization, albeit with these aspects of human *agency* operating within a context of societal and political-economic circumstances’ (Watson 2004, 453).

HRM practice and theory is increasingly focused on the management of the employees’ values, commitments and motivation, with the aim of ‘the production of a specific type of human being with specific self-conceptions and feelings’ (Deetz 2003, 24). This is very much in evidence in discussions on EE. Engaged employees are said to feel commitment to organizational values and to be motivated to contribute to the success of the organization, whilst experiencing a sense of wellbeing. Harter, Schmidt, and Keyes (2003, 6) suggest that engaged employees ‘experience joy, interest and love (or caring)’ whilst doing their job. There is supposed to be a two-way relationship between organization and employee. Macleod and Clarke (2009) talk of a ‘virtuous circle’, where the organization provides the preconditions to trigger engagement, and the results reinforce it. The notion of the psychological contract refers to the perceptions of employee and employer of their mutual obligations to one another (Guest and Conway 2002). MacLeod and Clarke’s (2009) definition of engagement emphasizes the role of the organization, in a similar way to that of the psychological contract literature: ‘Engaged organizations have strong and authentic values, with clear evidence of trust and fairness based on mutual respect, where two-way promises and commitments – between employers and staff – are understood and are fulfilled (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, 8).

The focus on EE can be considered to accord with a ‘soft’ model of human resource management (HRM), which is underpinned by a developmental humanism, where employees are treated as valuable assets and a source of competitive advantage (Legge 2005,105). The soft model of HRM assumes employees will work best if they are fully committed to the organization, and that commitment can be generated if employees are trusted, trained and developed (Guest 1987). This is contrasted with the hard HRM model, which manages staff in a more instrumental way, asserting tight control through performance management systems (Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, McGovern and Stiles 1997).

The soft HRM model’s emphasis on the psychology of the employee focuses on factors such as ‘individual motivation, discretionary effort, commitment and organizational climate/culture’ (Keenoy 2009, 465) - familiar in much writing on EE. The transformational leader plays a key role in ‘changing compliance to commitment’ (Legge 2005, 340). Similarly, for the ‘engaging leader’ in EE compliant performance as not enough – the organization demands the hearts of its employees. Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter (2011, 4-5) in a discussion on EE argue that: ‘contemporary organizations need employees who are psychologically connected to their work; who are willing and able to invest themselves fully in their roles; who are proactive and committed to high performance standards’.

But underpinning the ‘soft’ HRM model’s focus on the development of employee commitment and providing a supportive organizational culture is an unquestioned focus on performativity, in which the values of the marketplace dominate - ‘delivering ‘bottom line’ results which, in a competitive world, demand that the employee ‘goes the extra mile’ (Legge 2005, 340). The development and engagement of staff is primarily sought for the benefit of the organization, and the

logic of the market is central. As Grey (2005, 71) notes, 'culture management imagines a world in which shared values are directed towards the goal of productivity'. Research by Truss et al. (1997) into hard and soft HRM approaches concluded that 'even if the rhetoric of HRM is 'soft', the reality is almost always 'hard', with the interests of the organization prevailing over those of the individual' (Truss et al. 1997,70). They suggest also that organizations tend to adopt both models simultaneously. 'At the rhetorical level, many embraced the tenets of the soft version (training, development, commitment), but the underlying principle was invariably restricted to the improvement of bottom-line performance' (Truss et al. 1997, 69).

Contradictions underpin the 'hard'/'soft' dichotomy of normative models of HRM. For example, 'flexibility' can be interpreted as valuing development and initiative amongst core employees. It can also mean 'the numerical and financial flexibility to be achieved by treating labour as a variable cost-to-be-minimised input' (Legge 2005, 107-8).

Watson (2004, 451) however argues that the 'rhetoric versus reality style of ideological 'unmasking' has become a cliché'. What we are actually witnessing are the 'ambiguities and paradoxes' which arise in organizations out of the 'contradictions of capitalism' (Watson 2004, 449). This can be illustrated by understanding management and HRM(D) as a discourse, which will be examined in the next section.

### **Employee Engagement as Discourse**

A discourse perspective has the potential to reveal new understandings about HRD practices in organizations, in contrast to 'traditional' 'representationalist' perspectives (Rigg and Trehan 2002). 'Mainstream' management literatures are underpinned by an

empirical realist assumption that ‘social objects’ such as ‘strategy’ (and EE) have an ‘ontological existence’ ‘out there’ and are accessible to analysis (Ezzamel and Willmott 2008, 192). ‘Strategy is conceived as something that is an outcome of impersonal forces, available resources and/or the calculations of rational decision-makers’ (Ezzamel and Willmott 2008, 196). A discourse perspective argues that social objects such as ‘strategy’, ‘organizations’, or ‘human resource development’ do not exist independently, but are shaped by discourses, ‘conceptually fixed and labeled’ (Chia 2000, 513-4). HRD is brought into being through language, symbols and words (Sambrook 2006). Discourses are ‘the frame of references through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena and to explain how actors perceive and understand aspects of the world’ (Runhaar and Runhaar 2012). A discourse approach studies discursive resources (ideas and language) and discursive practices (communicative acts, both verbal and non-verbal, which express dominant values). The discourse comprises ‘a set of interrelated texts, and related practices of text production, dissemination and consumption, that serve to bring an object or idea into being, thus playing an important role in constituting material reality’ (Grant et al. 2009, 214).

EE can be analysed as a discursive construction; rather than a pre-existing, social object, a discourse plays a role in constituting the material reality that is experienced as EE. The discourse operates in the writing of books and research articles on the subject, in the websites of consultancy firms, and in the practice of HR, HRD and OD practitioners and consultants. The discourse serves to ‘talk EE into being’. As Du Gay notes, ‘techniques of economic and organizational management rarely come ready-made. They have to be invented, implanted, stabilized and reproduced’ (Du Gay 2003, 666). The surveys, targets and HRD interventions of EE,

for example, need to be embedded, they form part of the discourse, and are themselves shaped by the discourse. EE is also providing a focus for the development of essential ‘new’ management interventions – presented as the ‘solution’, EE also acts to shape the ‘problem’. Expert groups, such as consultants and management researchers, define both the problem and the solution, and become established and legitimated through this discourse (Reed 2000).

An ‘organization’ can be viewed as a ‘multi-discursive set of strategic narratives’ (Doolin 2003, 764). Sambrook (2006, 49), examining discourses of organizational learning and HRD in the UK National Health Service (NHS), emphasizes the multiple stakeholders who talk of HRD in varying ways, ‘giving rise to multiple discourses of HRD’. The discursive space can also be quite permeable; it is ‘uncontrollable and unpredictable’ (Dick 2006, 204). From a discourse perspective, an organization is not stable or static, but an ongoing process of ordering (Doolin 2003). New organizational realities are formed by the process of constructing and sharing new meanings and interpretations (Tsoukas 2005), in ‘an ongoing, political process of formation and potential transformation’ (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008:211).

Drawing on Keenoy’s (2009) analysis of HRM, the term EE can be seen in semiotic <sup>(1)</sup> terms as a ‘floating’ or ‘symbolic’ signifier ‘a generic term with a range of possible culturally situated meanings’ (Keenoy 2009. 457). EE can be seen as a culturally embedded construct, subject to multiple, sometimes competing, localized interpretations, and in a continuous process of change. This renders as problematic the prescriptive focus on measurement and generic interventions designed to facilitate engagement.

Legge (2005, 317) refers to ‘modernism’s propensity for grand ‘totalising’ meta-narratives or large-scale theoretical interpretations of purportedly universal

truths and application'. EE is fast becoming a meta-narrative – typing 'employee engagement' in the Google search engine got 48 million results, and 20,000 results in Google Scholar (4 April 2014). Clegg et al. (2011) discuss 'epochalist discourse' (Du Gay 2003) around organizational change, which could as easily be applied to that around EE. They note that much theorizing:

relied on a logic of overdramatic dichotomization constructing opposed and ethically juxtaposed categorical imperatives, where the dice were clearly loaded in favour of change. .... In doing so, stark disjuncture and oppositions were deployed .... acting as catalysts for transformation. Simple answers positing universal and invariable managerial recipes. Clegg et al. 2011, 495

We can see this approach operating with the wider EE discourse. For example, a UK government website launched in 2010 to help leaders and senior managers across the public, private and third sectors 'reap the benefits of EE' claims that: 'In an era of constrained resources, where nearly every organization is seeking "more for less", there are few industries that can afford to ignore EE' (Macleod 2010 online). Great claims are made for EE, often verging on evangelical. As Du Gay (2003) notes when discussing the work of 'management gurus', this commonly involves raising the idea of a 'threat', and the exhorting of the need to abandon old ways. To survive the threat requires transformation and regeneration, in an almost religious analogy.

Such 'epochalist discourse' is a 'rhetorical device' which presents simplified and generalized versions of processes of management through 'a simple and easily digestible set of slogans' which can be applied in similar ways to 'organizations and persons which are in fact of different quality and kind' (Du Gay 2003, 671). The challenge to be wary of 'epochalist' and over-dramatising pronouncements is a warning we can usefully heed when examining the discourses of EE. Claims are made



that “no organization can afford to ignore EE”. You can’t not be ‘for’ it, as you must be for motherhood and apple pie. The problem is defined at least in part by the solution, and the solution is EE. And underpinning this is a particular vision of the engaged employee, applying heart and mind to the cause of the organization. This will now be explored in the context of an analysis of identity and resistance.

### **Employee Engagement, Identity and Disciplinary Technology**

From a Foucauldian critical discourse perspective individuals such as employees come to understand the world in terms of the discourse and social practice, and are themselves shaped by the discourse, ‘constituted as subjects through the reproduction of discourses’ (Doolin 2003, 755). Discourses in this view are not totalizing – they operate within structures such as economic and political material realities (eg. organizations, regulations etc.), and individuals also have agency to interpret and make choices (Reed 2000). Multiple discourses may compete - the organization is a ‘site of struggle’ (Fleming and Spicer 2007). For example, public sector organizations widely face twin pressures of reducing spending and providing more customer-focused services (CIPD/PPMA 2012). In a case study of the development of a new discourse in health care in the public sector in New Zealand, Doolin notes a number of different ‘professional’ narratives, or discourses, which at times reinforced and at other times conflicted with one another (Doolin 2003).

‘Reinvention’ and ‘modernization’ of public sectors are sought through the introduction of business-style management, quasi-markets and targets, a focus on quality and measurement, and include the inculcation of new attitudes and values among professionals (Clegg et al. 2011; Learmonth and Harding 2004; Brignall and Modell 2000). A recent report by CIPD and PPMA (2012) on *Leading culture*

*change-employee engagement and public service transformation* argues that employers need to build a new psychological contract with staff. This should be underpinned by greater flexibility for individuals, skills and employability development opportunities, and an emphasis on quality people management and leadership. These EE management practices can be viewed as discourses, which serve to construct new identities in public sector workers.

Brignall and Modell (2000) explore one such public sector discourse, performance management. Different stakeholder groups, for example professionals and funding bodies, have different definitions of performance. Funding bodies focus on efficient use of resources, whereas professional groups of service providers tend to focus on non-financial aspects of performance, such as service to clients. The result is multiple definitions of performance, and conflicts between various stakeholders (Brignall and Modell 2000). Rather than the harmonious rational organization pictured in much discussion on EE, decision making in public sector organizations is intensely political. Attempts at cultural transformation are problematic and may succeed only at a superficial level. 'Whereas the more visible artifactual elements of culture may be readily manipulated, deep-seated beliefs and values may prove more resistant to external influence' (Davies, Nutley, and Mannion 2009, 112). Public sector services are complex, heterogeneous, deliver intangible services, have multiple stakeholders and operate in circumstances of high uncertainty (Brignall and Modell 2000), and this gives rise to ambiguities and tensions.

This does not only apply to organizations in the public sector. As Bolman and Deal (2008) note, organizations are complex, surprising, deceptive, and ambiguous.

Large organizations in particular include a bewildering array of people, departments, technologies, and goals. Moreover, organizations are open systems

dealing with a changing, challenging, and erratic environment. Bolman and Deal 2008, 3.

In the process of identity construction, a range of discourses within the organization and wider society feed into an individuals' identity make-up (Thomas and Davies 2005).

EE seeks to create the worker who loves his or her job, feels emotionally committed to the organization, and contributes 'discretionary effort'. It is the vision of the post-Fordist workplace, which replaces external regulation by command-and-control management with cultural management. 'By shaping the internal world, the identity, of people at work' (Grey 2005, 72), discourses operate as 'disciplinary technologies' to instil self-regulation in workers. These discourses seek to 'colonize worker subjectivities, such that they participate in their own subjugation, effectively removing worker opposition' (Thomas and Davies 2005, 686). This is caricatured by Cederstrom and Fleming (2012, 9) in their book *Dead Man Working*, where they argue that the Human Resource Manager has replaced the 'tyrannical boss'..... 'this new architect of corporate culture attempts to convince workers that they should enjoy their own exploitation. Their aim is clear. Not only to make us do something we would rather shun, but also to make us *want to do it*.'

We now frequently find this cultural management approach running in tandem to more Fordist control mechanisms, orchestrated through information technology, as was argued in the discussion on hard/soft HRM. For example, the university faculty member self-manages as a professional teacher and researcher. Layered on top of that, they experience increasing control and surveillance through online student module and teacher evaluations, quality assurance requirements, targets for number of publications in ranked peer reviewed academic journals, and income targets, along

with specified and numerically stated requirements for student learning support and teaching.

Individuals however are not passive recipients of organizational discourses, but also resist conscription in complex and nuanced ways. Informal and sometimes inconspicuous everyday practices can be acts of resistance, adapting and subverting dominant discourses. Thomas and Davies (2005, 683) contest the 'dualistic debate of 'compliance with' versus 'resistance to'. Focusing on UK public services, they take a discursive approach to explore the production of meanings and subjectivities in workers at the micro-level, how individuals come to know and to challenge the ways in which their identities are constituted. Individuals 'pervert and subtly shift meanings and understandings' as they recognize contradictions and tensions in their own identity performance (Thomas and Davies 2005, 687). Despite asymmetrical relations of power, alternative subject positions are generated. It is useful to consider this when examining the construct of disengagement, which will now be explored.

### **Disengagement explored**

Kahn (1990) suggested that disengagement is the opposite of engagement. Personal disengagement is defined as 'the uncoupling of selves from work roles; in disengagement they will withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances' (Kahn 1990, 694).

Disengaged employees fail to find meaning in their work, don't believe in the purpose of the organization, or feel powerless to influence the work environment when they perceive that it impacts adversely on them (Wollard 2011, 528). Wollard (2011) suggest it might be appropriate to conceive of a continuum of disengagement, rather than a simple dichotomy of engaged/disengaged.

Box 1 contains descriptions of a not untypical modern workplace, a warehouse run by the online retailer Amazon. Companies such as Amazon minimize costs for benefits and wages by employing largely temporary agency workers. The organization takes a Fordist approach to management of the work environment and work processes.

(Insert Box 1 Here)

The sources cited are not academic research into engagement, so it is not appropriate to single out Amazon specifically. But the business model of this and many similar organizations relies on sub-contracting workers on minimum wages, and focusing on speed and efficiency, obtained through technology – mediated command-and-control management. There does not seem to be great scope for a focus on EE.

It is a theme in much writing on EE that the company will benefit from engagement as much as the individual, and that organizations need to engage their employees in order to succeed in increasingly competitive marketplaces. EE is an economic ‘no brainer’. For example, in an article about EE, Harter, Schmidt, and Keyes (2003, 14) comment that ‘short-term fixes through negative reinforcement that may result in behaviour that helps the organization financially in the short-term may narrow the ownership and creativity of employees that limits long-term benefits to the organization’.

However the example of Amazon and other companies demonstrates that it is quite possible to have a successful business model that does not include EE. An alternative view of the history of work suggests that unhappiness of workers has not been a barrier to productivity and profitability, and corporations are still able to make profits through the work of ‘disengaged’ workers in warehouses in Rugeley and Lehigh Valley, contact centres in Uttar Pradesh, manufacturing plants in Guangdong

province, and zero-hours contract social care workers in Manchester, England, for example. Staff unhappiness is not a new phenomenon, but now has been given a new label, *disengagement*. Writing on EE tends not to distinguish between different types of workers or types of industries. It is argued that the definition of EE cuts across companies, industries, and cultures (Harter, Schmidt, and Keyes 2003). EE is deemed to be of help to all organizations and the people they employ. Although arguments are made in EE literature about the costs of disengagement to organizations and economies, much of the argument for engagement seems in fact to be based on an image of a certain type of organization, not ones in which perhaps the majority of the world's working population are employed.

Clearly many people working in organizations find their work satisfying, fulfilling and enjoyable, and feel committed to the goals of their organization or to their profession, and enjoy supportive HRM and HRD policies and practices. Organizations are not monolithic and different functions may operate in quite different ways and with different styles of organization and management. But equally much work is routine, unpleasant or arduous, and much management is autocratic. As O'Donnell et al. (2006) argue, whilst highly skilled knowledge workers may be able to make their voices heard in organizations,

in much of the rest of the world, and in the secondary and casual segments of labour markets in the developed world, labour remains a commodity to be hired and fired....HRD in such markets is largely driven by instrumental concerns.  
O'Donnell et al. 2006, 11

HRD's role in some organizations may be more about surfacing issues around workplace justice and employee representation than identifying factors around engagement. Do these workers need fair HRM policies and better employment rights

rather than EE interventions? Is there even scope to see how the work could become fulfilling and meaningful, as defined in the EE literature? How does the idea of 'engagement' sit in a context of work intensification and competition in a global recession? The modern workplace also entails structural features which impel over-engagement.

The term 'disengagement' places the focus on the pathology of the individual worker rather than the structural conditions in the workplace. Disengagement may be a reasonable response to unreasonable work conditions or demands. The ultimate disengagement is workers withdrawing their labour - this may be by the individual leaving or the collective striking. But large numbers of workers are not in a position to do this.

Engagement is supposed to be freely given, not commanded. But increasingly 'discretionary effort' is expected as part of regular performance. If an element of performance is commandeered and manipulated through engagement initiatives, isn't EE just another way to try to make workers work harder for the organization? Many jobs also demand the 'appearance of engagement' – EE could be regarded as an extension of the emotional labour of smiles and 'have a good day' required of customer service staff, for example. Back office staff and kitchen chefs need are also required to have a positive attitude, as this is supposed to be transferred to the service offering, for example in the form of tastier food. Compliant performance as not enough – the organization demands the hearts and souls of all its employees. The construct of disengagement is not really adequate to describe staff dissatisfaction in many circumstances. The term 'compliance' suggests a reluctance that might be communicated to managers. We might consider a construct of 'faux engagement'.

Here workers manifest external signs of engagement as required, but their heart and soul is not in it.

In the former ‘bureaucratic workplace’, the lives of individual workers were ‘set apart as separate spheres of existence: work and leisure, reason and emotion, public and private (Du Gay 2003, 669). In the modern workplace, the distinction between the employee at work and their persona and life outside work is increasingly blurred; their personal self must be fully engaged for the benefits of the organization.

### **Conclusions and significance for HRD**

Robert Tressel’s (1914) novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* highlighted the exploitation of workers working as painters and decorators in England in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neither workers, managers nor company owners questioned the current state of affairs – it was believed to be the natural order of things. A century on, the quotation at the start of this paper would not be out of place as a description of ‘disengagement’. A critical perspective on HRD argues that it is essential to question assumption as to ‘the order of things’, what is taken for granted, ‘the hegemonic beliefs about what is ‘real’ or ‘natural’ in organizations’ Callahan (2007).

This paper has explored some of the claims for EE, and some of the critiques. A critical and discourse perspective reveals EE as full of contested meaning. When one examines this within the context of a complex organization, further layers of complexity and contradiction come into play. There is still considerable debate over the construct of EE. However a critical perspective sees the construct as fraught with contradictions in itself.

In examining EE, I have highlighted the following:



- It is problematic to assume that worker-manager/organization goals are naturally aligned.
- EE has an overall performative intent with a priority focus on organizational goals.
- EE ostensibly aligns with the soft HRM model. However the hard HRM model often runs in parallel or overlays the soft approach.
- From a discourse perspective the distinction between ‘rhetoric’ and ‘reality’ is problematic.
- EE can be perceived as a discursive construction. Multiple and competing discourses operate in the organization as a ‘site of struggle’.
- Discourses act to construct identities of ‘the engaged worker’.
- Staff are constrained by ‘structure’ but also have some ‘agency’ to resist and interpret conscription into discourses.
- We should be cautious about the grand narrative of EE and the ‘epochalist claims’.
- Some workplaces appear not conducive to engagement.
- Some successful business models avoid EE.
- Disengagement needs to be explored within its organizational and professional context.

Wollard (2011) argues that ‘HRD practitioners must be at the forefront of encouraging communication within organizations and must recognise the signs of disengagement’ and to ‘find out if organizations really want their employees to be engaged’ (534). From a critical perspective this would include being alert to issues of social justice, organizational democracy, and performativity (Fenwick 2005, 231).

Solutions for disengagement may include better training for managers, and learning and development opportunities (Shuck, Rocco and Albornoz 2010), but they may also require a questioning of HRD's role and purpose. HRM and HRD activity focused on gaining more effort and commitment from workers needs to be subject to political analysis (Deetz 2003). In addressing disengagement, HRD must also consider work in its wider manifestations and context, which raises issues of ethics and purpose in HRD.

A critical perspective on HRD and EE allows surfacing and examination of unwritten assumptions behind theory and practice, and can help to identify and understand unintended consequences of practice. As HRD is a field of practice, theorising needs to pay attention to 'organizational contexts and commitments' (Fenwick 2005, 228), and this should include 'broader patterns of culture, power and inequality' (Watson 2004, 450). Callahan (2007) argues that a *critical constructionist HRD* can help to create new understandings to lead towards changed practice, engaging both employer and employee. Considering how dominant discourses bring practices such as EE into being, and construct identities in workers for the benefit of organizations, can potentially help towards an HRD practice that is not solely focused on organizational interests.

<sup>1.</sup> Note. Semiotics - Loosely defined as 'the study of signs' or 'the theory of signs'....A sign is a meaningful unit which is interpreted as 'standing for' something other than itself. Signs are found in the physical form of words, images, sounds, acts or objects...Signs have no *intrinsic* meaning and become signs only when sign-users invest them with meaning with reference to a recognized code. Chandler D. *Semiotics for Beginners*

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Box 1. The Amazon warehouse.

O'Connor (2013) describes the work process in a huge Amazon warehouse 'the size of nine football pitches', in Rugeley, UK. Workers in Amazon's warehouses – or "associates in Amazon's fulfilment centres" as the company would put it- are divided into four main groups .....the "pickers", push trolleys around and pick out customers' orders from the aisles. Amazon's software calculates the most efficient walking route to collect all the items to fill a trolley, and then simply directs the worker from one shelf space to the next via instructions on the screen of the handheld satnav device. Even with these efficient routes, there's a lot of walking. .... "You're sort of like a robot, but in human form," said the Amazon manager. "It's human automation, if you like." Amazon recently bought a robot company, but says it still expects to keep plenty of humans around because they are so much better at coping with the vast array of differently shaped products the company sells ( O'Connor, 2013).

The handheld computers give workers and their managers a real-time indication of their work rate according to their target. Workers are usually expected to pick one item every 30 seconds. If they are going slowly they can receive a text message from their manager. One worker likened the experience to 'being in a slave camp,' (O'Connor, 2013).

Soper (2011) writes about workers in an Amazon warehouse in Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania, USA. Workers complained about being forced to work at an unsustainable pace in soaring warehouse temperatures during a summer heatwave. 'Employees were frequently reprimanded regarding their productivity and threatened with termination, workers said. The consequences of not meeting work expectations were regularly on display, as employees lost their jobs and got escorted out of the warehouse' (Soper, 2011).

Box 1. The Amazon warehouse.

Source: O'Connor, (2013), Soper, (2011), Cadwalladr, (2013)